Old Testament Perspectives on God's Transformative Work

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Abstract

While largely ignored in the literature on spiritual formation, the Old Testament provides the biblical foundation and resources for spiritual formation. First, the creation account reminds us that at the moment when God endowed homo sapiens with the status of being image bearers, they were spiritually formed, living in harmony with God, themselves, and creation. Their sin, though, produced disharmony, though God immediately pursued reconciliation. The paper focuses on wisdom literature. The book of Proverbs intends to make a person wise (which has practical, ethical, and theological dimensions), and to be wise is to be spiritually formed. Proverbs teaches that wisdom takes effort, but it is also a gift of God. The source of wisdom in Proverbs is ultimately God and his revelation, not general revelation. While God's revelation in Proverbs is imparted through experience, observation, reflection, and tradition, Ecclesiastes reminds the reader that experience, observation, reflection, and tradition lead to the conclusion that life is meaningless. One must fear God first. Job is the story of a wise man growing in wisdom through the prism of suffering. For the Christian, we must read the Old Testament a second time in the light of Christ, and when we do, we realize that to grow in wisdom is to grow in the image of Christ (imitatio Christi). The end of the essay provides brief glimpses of how the historical narrative, prophecy and apocalyptic, and the Psalms contribute to the questions of the conference.

As announced, our conference intends to focus on the nature of divinely-caused moral transformation. In particular, as the conference announcement states, we are interested in two questions: "What is it about God that causes human transformation? And what is it about human persons such that they are transformed by God in that manner?"

I agree that it is correct to start our reflections with Scripture with me presenting on the Old Testament and Michael on the New Testament. Scripture is, after all, the Word of God. God speaks to us here in the most direct manner, which is why historically theologians have called it special revelation. That said, Scripture is not the only vehicle for divine revelation. Theologians have spoken of general revelation mediated by the creation itself. There are two books of divine revelation according to the Belgic Confession. And I would not deny that God can speak to us in other ways like through our conscience, dreams, other people, and more. However, as special revelation Scripture, Old and New Testaments, occupies pride of place and claims to divine knowledge through other means will never contradict the revelation of Scripture. That is why the church recognizes Scripture as canon, the standard of faith and practice.

But of course, in spite of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, Scripture is not always clear. The best statements of the perspicuity of Scripture make this clear as exemplified by the Westminster Confession of Faith:

> All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

With that background, we turn now to the Old Testament to explore the question of divinely-caused moral transformation. I am not sure there is a single answer to the questions we are posing, but I have decided to focus on wisdom literature, which may surprise some for reasons I will mention later.[1] But before I look at wisdom, I think it will benefit us to start with some comments on Genesis 1-3 because here we have the foundational biblical teaching on the nature of God and the nature of humanity and I believe the basis for divinely-caused spiritual transformation.

Genesis 1-3 is the foundation of all Scripture. Unfortunately, all too often discussions get burdened by questions of the relationship between these chapters and modern science, a topic I have addressed elsewhere.[2] To summarize my understanding of the genre not only of Genesis 1-3 but also of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, we have here history but a figurative depiction of that history. Genesis 1-3 informs us that God created everything, including humanity, but with no intention to tell us how God did it.

The particular way in which the story is told has every intention of laying a foundation for our understanding of the nature of God and humans as well as creation. They are foundational stories; mythic in the scholarly sense of the term.

For our purposes, I will not give anything close to an exhaustive exposition but rather will highlight what we learn about God and humans that will be relevant to our conference topic.

And the most important teaching concerns our creation in God's image.

> Let us make human beings in our image to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, and all the wild animals that scurry along the ground. So, God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God, he created them; male and female, he created them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

That God created humans in his image is one of many features of the creation accounts that demonstrate humanity's special place in creation and their distinctive relationship with God. Interestingly, while on the surface of it, it is clear that being in God's image is an immense privilege, the concept is never defined.

The reason why the concept of image is not further defined is because the original audience would have immediately known its significance. We can recover that significance by reading the text in its ancient Near Eastern context. This is not the place to go into the details of the evidence,[3] but the words image and likeness are used in reference to statutes of kings. We are like statues of our divine king and thus represent God in his broader creation. We reflect God's glory like the moon reflects the light of the sun. Image is not a specific attribute that we share with God and that differentiates us from the other animals, but rather it is a

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[1] I will offer brief comments on other major sections of the Old Testament (historical books, prophets, apocalyptic, and Psalms, at the end.

[2] Tremper Longman III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 1-78.

[3] For which see Longman, *Genesis* (SOGBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 36-38.

status. And it is a status that comes with responsibility as we exercise God's rule among the rest of creation.

The creation story informs us that at the point of creation humans were fully spiritually formed.[4] Humans were morally innocent and living in harmony with God, each other, and the creation.

Of course, that is not our present condition and Genesis 3 gives us a figurative depiction of a historical event that explains our alienation from God and our need for transformation. Without going into the details of the story, humans exercised their divinely-given freedom to choose autonomy and so fractured their relationship with God.[5]

But God does not give up on his human creatures. Right from the start he pursues reconciliation. This desire for reconciliation is signaled by the tokens of grace in the various stories of Genesis 1-11 (clothing to Adam and Eve; a mark on Cain; allowing Noah and his family to survive the flood, and ultimately the call of Abraham) and the mere fact that God allowed humanity to continue to exist.

The disruption of relationship between God and his human creatures means that the latter cannot easily come into God's presence. God makes his special presence known through the consecration of certain spaces (altars, tabernacle, temple) which were surrounded by taboos and the requirement of sacrifice that acknowledged our sin.[6]

Sin does not remove our status as image bearers. All humans are created in the image of God. However, how we reflect God in the world is tarnished. Moral and spiritual formation means that we grow into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) who of course is the perfect exemplar of the divine image (Col. 1:15).

For our purposes, these opening chapters of Genesis demonstrate that we humans need moral and spiritual transformation. So what do we learn from the Old Testament about who God is that causes human transformation and what is it about human persons such that they are transformed by God in that manner? Our conference description goes on to ask "does human transformation occur due to contact with God's being, grace, power, word, presence, love? Is the contact cognitive, experiential, interpersonal, mystical, perceptual? Is moral change best described in terms of transformed emotions, beliefs, dispositions, desires, dependence? Put simply, what is the nature and effect of the Holy Spirit's work in sanctification?"

I have decided to focus my comments on the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). For one thing, though my research and writing have ranged pretty far and wide over OT literature, wisdom has long been at the core of my interests. But also, I think that wisdom literature is often neglected as a resource for spiritual formation. Indeed, if I may, the first reaction Steve had to my suggestion that I focus on wisdom literature was to remind me that this conference was about God causing human transformation and that wisdom literature is all about what theologians call general revelation, not special revelation.

And Steve is right to think that wisdom literature was often stereotyped that way in the previous generation of scholarship and is still a popular way to characterize it. The sages looked at how the world worked and from their observation they figured out what worked and what didn't to navigate life well. Walter Zimmerli famously asserted that "wisdom thinks

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[4] For the view that the creation story is not about the emergence of *homo sapiens*, but rather the moment that God conferred the status of image bearer on humanity (thus *homo divinus*), see Longman, Confronting Old Testament Controversies, pp. 62-64.

[5] Longman, *Genesis*, 63-73.

[6] Longman, *Immanuel in Our Place* (P and R Publishing, 2001), 1-74.

resolutely with the framework of a theology of creation."[7] As Will Kynes and I along with others have pointed out,[8] this perspective on wisdom was essentially a mainline Protestant effort to find an ecumenical even secular corner of the canon, expressed well by William Brown:

> Ancient Israel's sages had no qualms incorporating the wisdom of other cultures. Biblical wisdom seeks the common good along with the common God. Wisdom's international, indeed universal appeal constitutes its canonical uniqueness. The Bible's wisdom corpus is the open door to an otherwise closed canon.[9]

The preface to the book of Proverbs tells us that its purpose is to make its readers wise. The "immature" (*peti*, traditionally "simple" or "simpleminded") gain wisdom and those who are already wise can grow wiser (Prov. 1:4-5). To be wise is not like getting a PhD. Once a person gets a PhD, they are always "Dr. so-and-so" no matter what their mental capability. But, as the story of Solomon in Kings shows us, one with great wisdom can become a fool, and the wise can become wiser, as we will see in Job.

But what is wisdom? As I describe wisdom, I hope to show the connection with spiritual formation. Growth in wisdom is growth in one's spiritual and moral life as well as growth in the ability to navigate life well.[10]

There are three dimensions to wisdom: practical, ethical, and theological. The reason why the former generation stereotyped wisdom in the way that they did was that they only thought of wisdom as practical, as the skill of living. And surely wisdom is that. We can see this when we isolate certain proverbs from their broader context.

A wise child brings joy to a father;
a foolish child brings grief to a mother.

Tainted wealth has no lasting value,
but right living can save your life.

Lazy people are soon poor;
hard workers get rich. (Prov. 10:1-2, 4)[11]

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[7] W. Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1964), 316.

[8] Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

[9] William. P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, 2014), 3. See also Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom ad Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford, 2013) and the summary statement by Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville, 2007), 344.

[10] At the last Evangelical Theological Society held in San Diego in November 2024, there was an entire session devoted to the connection between wisdom literature and spiritual formation to which I responded. This session is in anticipation of the publication of a book by Old Testament professors from American, England, and Australia and is being shepherded by Brittany Melton (Regent College) and Dan Fredericks (Belhaven College).

[11] I am skipping Proverbs 10:3 because it mentions the Lord.

But wisdom is not only practical it is ethical. As it says in Proverbs 1:3b, the purpose of proverbs is "to help them do what is right, just, and fair.." A wise person is righteous; a foolish person is wicked. The proverbs themselves often reflect the ten commandments, particularly the final six that concern human-to-human relationships.[12]

But, beyond the practical and ethical dimensions, to be wise requires a right relationship with God. There is a theological dimension. Proverbs teaches this in two ways. First, and most famously, by asserting that:

Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov. 1:7)

A wise person, a person undergoing spiritual growth, must fear the Lord. Indeed the process of becoming wise does not even begin until one fears the Lord. People who are wise on a practical level and do not fear the Lord (and are not ethical) are manipulative fools. They may know how to act and speak in a way that brings them material benefit but they are nonetheless not wise. Proverbs does not, as some people think, make a necessary connection between wisdom and wealth or folly and poverty.

But back to the fear of the Lord. What is it and why fear? Why not "the love of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom/knowledge"? In answer to the first question, I want to make a linguistic observation, one that most will be aware of. Languages do not line up on a one-to-one basis, which by the way is why word-for-word translations are both stilted and misleading (e.g., the NASB, ESV). Words have a semantic range and the meaning of the Hebrew word *yir'at* can range from dread and terror to something like respect. One thing that we know is that the fear of the Lord leads to obedience. So in my, and most Hebrew scholars', estimation, in this context *yir'at* is best represented by the English word fear. But we must immediately qualify by saying that this is not a fear that makes one run away. Rather it is a fear that demonstrates an awareness that we are not the center of the universe; there is one who is so much greater than we are and deserves our rapt attention and obedience.

And this recognition helps us answer the second question. Why not love? Well, of course we are to love God, but to love someone is not necessarily to acknowledge the power differential we have with them, in this case God. To those who object by saying perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), I respond by saying that indeed God's love for us casts out the fear of other people, but not the fear of God himself.

The role of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs is also key for our understanding of the fundamentally theological nature of our growth in wisdom.

We first encounter Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20-33, but our exposition will begin in Proverbs 9. Proverbs 9 is the linchpin of the book. Proverbs has two major parts. Proverbs 1-9 can be described as a collection of lectures or discourses of a father to his son or of Woman Wisdom to others. Then Proverbs 10-31 contains the short observations, prohibitions, and admonitions that we typically call proverbs that give the book its name. Many casual readers fail to see the hermeneutical implication of this structure.

But first, Proverbs 9. In Proverbs 9, we encounter two women, Wisdom and Folly, and both of them invite the reader to a meal. To agree to eat a meal with someone is to accept a deeper, more intimate relationship with them. Notice that both of them invite the same group (the simple [immature]/those who lack good judgment, 9:4, 16).

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[12] Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom*, 169-72.

Notice the contrast in the meal. Wisdom's is a "great banquet" including wine. Folly's is "stolen water" and "food" that is to be "eaten in secret" (9:17). The latter seems thin, but the enticement might be because the meal offers something forbidden and secret. The reader must accept the invitation of one or the other, neutrality is not possible.

But who are these women? The key to their identity is the location of their house. Woman Wisdom's house is "on the heights overlooking the city." In ancient Israel, indeed in the ancient Near East generally, only one house could be located at the heights of the city and that is the temple. Woman Wisdom stands for God's wisdom; indeed for God himself. To accept Woman Wisdom's invitation is to enter a deeper and more intimate relationship with God.

But what about Woman Folly? Her house is also located "on the heights overlooking the city" (9:14). She too represents deity, but rather than Yahweh she stands for the false gods (Baal, Marduk, Asherah, etc.) who entice God's people away from Yahweh.

Thus the choice presented in Proverbs 9 is do we dine with Yahweh or with an idol/false god? The poetic voice urges us toward the former by alerting us that choosing the latter leads to death. Folly does not want a relationship; she wants to kill us.

Now let's take note that the reader is called to make this decision in this pivotal chapter at the end of the discourses and before the proverbs per se. In essence, it theologizes the very concept of wisdom and folly. In other words, in the proverbs to come whether or not they are explicitly theological they are so. Let me illustrate with an example:

Lazy people are soon poor;
hard workers get rich. (Prov. 1:4)

This proverb seems like a simple observation that is generally true. If one works hard they will experience the benefits of their labor and if they are not, they will suffer.[13] But reading Proverbs 1:4 through the prism of Proverbs 9, we are meant to reason like this. "If I am lazy, then I am a fool and acting like someone who has a relationship with a false god. But if I am a hard worker, then I am acting with wisdom and like one who has a relationship with Yahweh."

So to grow in wisdom means that one is experiencing moral/spiritual transformation. One is developing a deeper and more intimate relationship with God. But are God or our efforts the cause of that transformation? Proverbs, I think, would answer, both.

Take Proverbs 1:20-33 in which Woman Wisdom urges people to listen to her. Notice she is in a public place like a prophet calling out to all who can hear. She calls for people to listen to her and repent at her rebuke. If they do, then she says she will "share my heart with you" (NLT) or according to the NIV "pour out my thoughts to you.." The ESV gets closer to the Hebrew with "I will pour out my spirit (*ruah*) to you."

Now the reason why the NLT and NIV go the direction that they do is likely because they rightly don't want to mislead people to think that this is a reference to the third person of the Trinity.[14] Teaching on the Trinity is something further developed in the New Testament as a matter of progressive revelation.

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[13] Elsewhere I have shown (and it is generally recognized except by those in the prosperity gospel movement) that proverbs are not giving guarantees, but rather the best route to a desired conclusion all other things being equal.

[14] With regard to the NLT I say that with some confidence because I was the primary translator of Proverbs in the NLT.

But still the point is that if people turn to Woman Wisdom (and remember she represents God), she imparts herself to them and makes them wise. In other words, a relationship with her will result in moral and spiritual transformation.[15]

The same dynamic can be seen in a second example found in Proverb 2. Here it is the father who speaks to his son. He calls on the son to pay attention to his teaching. He urges his son to adopt an attitude of urgency to get wisdom:

Tune your ears to wisdom,
and concentrate on understanding.
Cry out for insight,
and ask for understanding.
Search for them as you would for silver;
seek them like hidden treasures. (Prov. 2:2-4)

The son must exert utmost effort in the pursuit of spiritual transformation. But then comes the other side of the equation:

Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord,
and you will gain knowledge of God.
For the Lord grants wisdom!
From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He grants a treasure of common sense to the honest.
He is a shield to those who walk with integrity.
He guards the paths of the just
and protects those who are faithful to him. (Prov. 2:5-8)

Michael Austin, quoting Willard, gets at the dynamic that the book of Proverbs presents to us in a book not on Proverbs but on humility and love.

> Cultivating character is nonnegotiable for anyone who is serious about following Jesus Christ. The ancient Greeks believed that if you wanted to become a better person, to grow in virtue, it was mostly up to you. You had to work at it. Aristotle gives voice to this belief when he asserts that "we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions." Fortunately, we are not left on our own to grow in virtue. That is not to say that we don't need to do something. As Dallas Willard helpfully observed, "Grace is opposed to earning, but it is not opposed to effort." We are transformed by God's Spirit and by working with God in a variety of ways. The spiritual disciplines, including deep involvement in a Christian community, offer the context for our efforts to grow, grounded in God's grace and love.[16]

So what do we learn about spiritual transformation from the book of Proverbs? We must work hard at it and when it happens we acknowledge that God did it.

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[15] See my more detailed treatment in T. Longman III, "Spirit and Wisdom," in *Presence, Power and Promise: The Role of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament*, edited by David G. Firth and Paul D. Wegner (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011), 97-8.

[16] Michael W. Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ* (Grand. Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), p. 15, citing Dallas Willard, *Life without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 121.

One way to work hard at it is to learn from the teaching of Proverbs itself. The book purports to guide the reader into deeper wisdom, making them righteous and mature. But isn't the teaching based on general revelation, learning from observation and experience (e.g., Proverbs 6:6-8), tradition from previous generations (e.g., Prov. 4:1-4a), and from our mistakes (e.g., Prof. 10:17)? The answer is yes to the latter but no to the former. Proverbs claims that even our ability to learn in these ways is because God made us that way:

An ear to hear and an eye to see—
Yahweh made both of them. (Prov. 20:12, my translation).

At this point, a second wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, helps us by teaching that experience and observation apart from God are empty.

Excursus: Ansberry on *imitatio dei* (*Christi*) in the book of Proverbs[17]

Before continuing, I want to give a very brief summary of the a recent paper on Proverbs and spiritual formation by Christopher Ansberry. Christopher's perspective on the topic is very similar to mine, but he highlights and discusses it using different terminology, which I find helpful.

He rightly points out that the proverbs (he uses the term "aphorisms") of the book are not random insights but rather contribute to the development of character types (the wise and the fool) that serve to form people spiritually particularly in the renewal of their minds and their moral transformation. According to Ansberry, "these character types and sayings are designed to train readers' construals so that they might see people, actions, and situations from a perspectival knowledge governed by the fear of YHWH."

He goes on to demonstrate that the character type of the wise person embodies the virtues and practices of God himself (something that I spoke of in terms of Woman Wisdom as representing God himself and Proverbs call to form an intimate relationship with her). So as we become wise we become more like God and thus to growing in spiritual maturity is a process of *imitatio dei*. He goes on to say, as I do, that that divine wisdom is incarnated in Christ, so that "the emulation of these character types participates in and emulates Christ's character," and thus it is also appropriate to talk about Proverbs as a vehicle for *imitatio Christi*.

The key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes is to recognize that there are two distinct voices in the book not just one. There is Qohelet who speaks starting in Ecclesiastes 1:12 and ends in 12:7. Qohelet speaks in the first person throughout ("I, Qohelet"), but in 12:8 through 14 someone is talking about Qohelet ("he, Qohelet)", and this second unnamed wise man is talking to someone, namely his son (Eccl. 12:12). Though it is debated, it seems best to attribute Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 to the second wise man as well. Thus, his words frame those of Qohelet, thus leading scholars to refer to him as the frame narrator. Like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes features a father instructing his son. The father wants to teach his son by using Qohelet's thoughts on life as a foil. The reader needs to ask two questions then. What is the message of Qohelet and what is the message of the second wise man. We also need to recognize that the

[17] In a paper "The Renewal of the Mind and the Formation of Self: Perspectival Knowledge and Imitation through the Aphorisms and Character Types of Proverbs," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the ETS in San Diego (November 2024). Thanks to Ansberry for a copy of the lecture and permission to cite it. See also his *Proverbs* in the ECOT (Zondervan, 2024).

message of the book is not what Qohelet says, but what the second wise man tells his son in response to Qohelet.

So what is Qohelet's message? To summarize, he believes that life is difficult and then you die. He tries to find the meaning of life in work, wisdom, pleasure, money, power, and status and each time concludes "meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless."

What makes life meaningless? First, and perhaps most frequently, he cites death. Death renders life meaningless. Notice how his mind works as he explores wisdom as an avenue to meaning. He certainly affirms the relative benefit of wisdom over foolishness: "Wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness. For the wise can see where they are going, but fools walk around in the dark" (Eccl. 214). But then he observes that "both will die" (Eccl. 2:15) and so he concludes "Since I will end up the same as the fool, what's the value of all my wisdom? This is all so meaningless!" (Eccl. 2:15).

The second reason Qohelet concludes that life is meaningless is because injustice is rife in the world. After all, one gets no reward in the afterlife, life might still have meaning if that reward followed good behavior in this life. But that is not Qohelet's observation:

> I have seen everything in this meaningless life, including the death of good young people and the long life of wicked people. So don't be too good or too wise! Why destroy yourself. On the other hand, don't be too wicked either. Don't be a fool! Why die before your time? Pay attention to these instructions, for anyone who fears God will avoid both extremes. (Eccl. 7:15-18)

Why is life meaningless? Because God is unjust.

Finally, why is life meaningless? Because even though God made the world so that there is a right time for everything (Eccl. 3:1-8), humans can't discern the proper time.

> What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful of its own time. He has also planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. (Eccl. 3:9-11).

For Qohelet, life is difficult and without meaning and then comes death. End of story. But what is the message of the second wise man? What message does he want to deliver to his son (the implied reader)?

The second wise man, or frame narrator, first of all, gives his son Qohelet's bottom line "everything is meaningless" (Eccl. 12:8). He then compliments him as "wise," and tells him that "the Teacher sought of find just the right words to express truths clearly" (Eccl. 12:10). To paraphrase, the frame narrator tells his son that Qohelet is 100 percent right. Life is difficult and then comes death. In the light of 12:13-14, though, I conclude that his assertion of the truth of Qohelet's conclusion is dependent on his framework for looking for the meaning of life which is signaled by the repetitive phrases "under the sun" (Eccl. 1:3, 9; 2:11, etc. for a total of twenty-nine times) and "under heaven" (Eccl. 2:3; 3:1). No wonder Qohelet came to the conclusion that he did. After all, he was trying to find life's meaning or purpose apart from God's revelation.

Thus, he tells his son to not stay "under the sun" but rather to:

> Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad. (Eccl. 12:13b-14)

In other words, put God first and then life will have meaning. Put God first and all those other things (pleasure, wisdom, wealth, work, etc.) can find their proper place. If one tries to find meaning in anything or anyone other than God than that thing or person becomes an idol and idols always let us down.

Notice the three parts to the frame narrator's admonition. Fear God—establish a right relationship with God. Maintain that relationship by obeying him. And live in the light of the future judgment. This is kind of an Old Testament version of justification, sanctification, and eschatology, all in a verse and a half.

But also, and this is admittedly a bit speculative, I detect an allusion to the three-fold Jewish canon here. Most scholars agree that Ecclesiastes is one of the last books of the Old Testament period, written when the final canon is talking shape.[18] The phrase "fear God" may allude to the Writings (Ketubim), "obey the commands" to the Law (Torah), and the future judgment to the Prophets (Nebi'im). In other words, don't try to find the meaning of life in a fallen world, but rather turn to God's revelation.

Spiritual transformation does not come though our own efforts, but only when we fear God, obey his commandments, and live in the light of the future judgment. Again, we don't earn it, God does it. But it does take effort.

Turning briefly to the book of Job, our first comment is that it is not primarily a book on suffering, but rather on wisdom. Suffering is the pretense to talk about where wisdom may be found and also how we might grow in wisdom. It's not that the book says nothing about suffering as we will see, but it is certainly not a theodicy.

We will not be able to dive deep into the details of the book. For our purposes it will be enough to talk about Job at the beginning of the book and then at the end with some comments on what led to his transformation.[19]

Job is a good illustration of how one can grow in wisdom and also of God's role in that transformation. Job is wise at the beginning of the story: "There once was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless—a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil" (Job 1:1). The default, though not the guarantee, in wisdom is that the wise will flourish and Job indeed does.

The prose preamble to the book, though, has the Accuser (one of God's angelic court) challenge the motivation for Job's piety. He is in it for the benefits. Thus, God agrees to remove those benefits to see whether or not Job is truly spiritually mature for the right reasons.

The bulk of the book, which we don't have time to dwell on, is a debate between Job and his three friends (Job 3-27). They both affirm a type of retribution theology. They all believe that the godly should flourish and only the wicked suffer. To the three friends, Job's suffering is the result of his being a great sinner. They don't need evidence of actual sin, all the evidence they need is his suffering. Job must repent if he is to be restored to his former status. For Job, since he knows he is not a sinner and he too accepts the retribution theology of the three friends that only sinners should suffer, the only conclusion he has come to is that God is unjust. He wants to confront God and set him straight.

He eventually has his intimate encounter with God, but it does not go as he imagined.[20] Rather than charging God with injustice, God upbraids Job, not by answering his question and

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[18] Tremper Longman III, "Determining the Historical Context of Ecclesiastes," in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, edited by Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 89-102.

[19] My fullest treatment of the book of Job is in Tremper Longman III, *Job* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

[20] I pass over the monologue of Elihu (Job 32-37). He too ties Job's suffering to his sin.

telling him why he suffered, but by putting him in his place. God is the Creator and he is the creature. Job responds appropriately when he proclaims:

I know you can do anything,
and no one can stop you.
You asked, "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?"
It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about,
things too wonderful for me.
You said, "Listen and I will speak!
I have some questions for you,
and you must answer them."
I had only heard about you before,
but now I have seen you with my own eyes.
I take back everything I said,
and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance." (Job 42:1-6)

Some want to argue that Job's speech undermines the whole book. Job repents and God restores him. Doesn't that mean the friends were correct all along? No, and God tells them that they were wrong (Job 42:7-9). Job is not repenting of sins that led to his suffering but of his charge that God was unjust (Job 40:1-5).

So how does the book of Job inform our question about God's role in spiritual transformation? Job has matured through his suffering and his more intimate experience of God ("I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes," Job 42:5). The book has shown that human wisdom is inadequate whether it is that of the three friends, Elihu, or even Job himself (see also the powerful poem of wisdom in Job 28, which is a moment of temporary insight by Job). It also indicates that growth can come through suffering as long as we persistently pursue God even if that is through lament, but then ultimately trust in spite of having no answers.

Before leaving the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, it is important to intentionally look a second time (briefly) from a New Testament perspective. After all, to put it plainly, the Old Testament ultimately is all about Jesus. At least that is what Jesus said to his followers in his post-resurrection appearances. To the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us that "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27 [NIV]). Then later, Jesus tells a broader group of disciples that "everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). This latter reference refers to the three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and Writings (*Ketubim* where Psalms are the first book). The wisdom books are in the Writings and thus Jesus's statement asks us to reflect on how exactly Jesus related to these books.[21]

This is not the place to go into detail because each of these three books have distinctive contributions, but I do want to reflect briefly on Jesus's relationship to wisdom. The Gospels not only present Jesus as incredibly wise (Matt. 13:54-57; Mark 1:22; 6:2-4; Luke 2:40, 52), but also as a sage. Jesus taught using figures of speech which were a teaching

[21] For a fuller presentation of how the Old Testament as a whole anticipates Christ and the necessity to do two readings of the Old Testament, one to read it like the Old Testament audience and a second from a post-resurrection perspective, see my contribution to *Five Views of Christ int he Old Testament*, in Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King, editors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022).

vehicle of the sage in the first century. Indeed, in the Greek translation of Proverbs, The Greek words for for figure of speech (*paroimia*) as well as parable (*parabole*) are used to translate the Hebrew word *mashal* (proverb). Paul too reflects on the wisdom of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16) and notably proclaims that "in him (Christ) lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 1:3).

Especially relevant to our study is how the New Testament associates Jesus with Woman Wisdom. First, though I need to give a brief account of Proverbs 8. After an introduction by the poetic narrator (8:1-3) that again emphasizes her location as in a public place and on a hilltop, Woman Wisdom herself speaks.

To summarize, she describes herself as the epitome of wisdom itself. Her advice and speech are wholesome. She is prudent and has good judgment. She is righteous and just (8:20). As in Proverbs 1 and 9 she invites people into a relationship with her. She also claims:

The Lord formed me from the beginning,
before he created anything else.
I was appointed in ages past,
at the very first, before the earth began.
I was born before the oceans were created,
before the springs bubbled forth their waters.
Before the mountains were formed,
before the hills, I was born—
Before he had made the earth and fields
and the first handfuls of soil.
I was there when he established the heavens,
when he drew the horizon on the oceans.
I was there when he set the clouds above,
when he established springs deep in the earth,.
I was there when he set the limits of the seas,
so they would not spread beyond their boundaries.
And when he marked off the earth's foundations,
I was the architect at his side.
I was his constant delight,
rejoicing always in his presence.
And how happy I was with the world he created;
how I rejoiced with the human family! (Prov. 8:22-31)

This passage raises many questions and has been the focus of much discussion and debate over the centuries up to the present day that we will not address here.[22] What is clear is that Wisdom makes the claim that she was present from the beginning and knows how the creation comes together. The implicit message is that if one wants to know how the world works, she is the one to get to know.

But it is in the light of this passage that we should read Colossians 1:15-17:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,[23]
For through him God created everything

[22] For a more extensive discussion, see Tremper Longman III, Proverbs.
[23] Greek, "the firstborn over all creation."

in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
Such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.
He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.

Paul clearly has Proverbs 8:22-31 in mind here. He associates Jesus with Woman Wisdom.[24] We also see an allusion to Proverbs 8 as well as Genesis 1 in the opening to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:1-3).

As Christians read the book of Proverbs and are challenged to make a choice between Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, we can think of the choice as between an intimate relationship with Christ or with an idol, that is anything we put in the place of God.

As we deepen our relationship with Wisdom (Christ), we grow in wisdom. We are formed into the image of Christ.

Final Thoughts

As mentioned, this paper focuses on wisdom literature, but of course, the Old Testament provides even further resources that speak to our topics. It would take a book to do justice to the entire witness of the Old Testament, but I will provide brief synopses of how in general I think other parts of the Old Testament inform the issue. These paragraphs are meant to be suggestive and not exhaustive.

The bulk of the Old Testament consists of books that follow the story of God's pursuit of sinful humans. One way of referring to Genesis through Esther is redemptive history. There is an old debate about the function of these historical books and this is reflected in preaching. Some treat the Old Testament stories like moral and spiritual lessons, in a kind of "go and do likewise" approach ("be like David against Goliath") or "go and don't do likewise" ("don't be like Solomon who married dicey women and ended up apostatizing"). And then there are those who say this approach is illegitimate, that the point is God acting in space and time for our redemption, a history that points to and culminates in Christ.

In my opinion, this is not an either-or. Both are true and important. Of course, when it comes especially to the Old Testament stories we have to take account of the issue of continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament times and the New Testament times as well as cultural differences. But in the final analysis, we can read the Old Testament for encouragement in our spiritual transformation. We can read the life of Abraham as a journey of faith as he moves from doubt and manipulation to trust in God. We can read the Joseph story to learn how to live in the knowledge of the providence of God even when we experience the evil of others ("you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, for the saving of many lives," Gen. 50:19-20). Returning to wisdom, we can read the Solomon story as the story of lost wisdom when he failed to put God first at the end of his life. And we could go on.

The book of Psalms is a literary sanctuary, a holy textual space where God's people speak to God in intimate terms. Calvin famously noted how the psalms are an "anatomy of the

[24] The term "associates" rather than "identifies" is critical here. Proverbs 8 is not a prophecy or description of Jesus (an error that leads to Arianism).

soul," in that there is not an emotion a human can feel that is not expressed in the book. Thus, he goes on to say it is a "mirror of the soul." As we read it and identify with the psalmist, we can see whether we are moving toward or away from God. Walter Brueggemann identified three main types of psalms. Hymns, which he called psalms of orientation, which we pray when life is gong great. We love God, others, and ourselves. Laments arepsalms of disorientation, which we sing when life is falling apart. We talk to God about our messed-up lives, often with anger directed toward God. Then there are thanksgiving psalms, songs of reorientation, when God answers our lament. Glenn Pemberton noted a fourth category, psalms of confidence, sung when we still are in pain, but now we are ready to express trust in God in spite of the pain (Psalm 23). The point here is that whatever is going on in our lives, the book of Psalms directs us to God's presence. Interestingly, the laments often begin with expressions of trouble or pain, but end with confidence and hope. Thus, coming into God's presence with honesty can lead to our transformation.

The prophets are God's covenant lawyers. When God's people break the covenant, God calls on his prophets to bring a case against them by warning them that if they don't repent, then God will bring the covenant curses (e.g., Deuteronomy 28) on them. Here the hope is spiritual transformation that begins with repentance. Unfortunately, there are only rare instances of people who actually respond to the prophetic word (though see Joel and the city of Nineveh in the book of Jonah). Even so, most prophets also have restoration (or salvation) oracles for the remnant who survive the judgment. The message of the prophets ought to get us to think about our own lives and the need for what my old pastor Jack Miller and my long-time, now departed friend Tim Keller emphasized, the need for daily repentance for spiritual transformation.

Daniel (and John in the book of Revelation) are not prophets per s, or at least not in the same way as Isaiah and Jeremiah). They never hear directly from God but rather have visions that are interpreted by angels. They do not call on God's people to repent or threaten them with judgment. Rather, they talk about the judgment that is coming on the wicked, and that is meant to encourage God's people living in the midst of a turbulent, dangerous world. To people who think evil is in control, Daniel and John say, no, it may look that way, but God is in control, and he will have the final victory. Therefore, their message (extremely relevant for today, of course) is that people of faith should not live in fear and anger, but rather with confident faith and "a bright hope for tomorrow." Nothing in Daniel or Revelation (or anywhere in Scripture) encourages culture war, but rather persistent faith in the light of God's ultimate victory.